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UNCLAS KATHMANDU 001605

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SUBJECT: NEPAL ARMY HOLDS MAIDEN PRESS CONFERENCE

1. (U) In an apparent effort to burnish its public image and promote public confidence that it is gaining ground against Maoist insurgents, the Royal Nepal Army (RNA) held its first-ever press conference in Kathmandu August 15. Speaking to reporters, Col. Deepak Gurung, head of the RNA's Public Affairs office, said RNA successes had crippled the Maoists' command-and-control network, seriously impaired their mobility in the field, undermined their logistics, demoralized their cadre, and induced surrenders in ever-increasing numbers. Gurung reported RNA statistics of 2,290 insurgents confirmed killed in action; 300 insurgents wounded; 163 RNA killed in action; 235 soldiers wounded; 536 policemen killed; 667 civilians killed; and a recovery rate of weapons looted of an unimpressive 13 percent. The RNA estimates current Maoist strength at 3000-4000 hard-core cadre, complemented by 10,000-15,000 militia members. The RNA, on the other hand, has bolstered its 50,000-man troop strength by an additional 5000 new recruits, with another 5000 expected during the new fiscal year. To provide additional security for sensitive infrastructure and for the November 13 national elections, Gurung announced RNA plans to hire 10,000 retired soldiers on contract. Anticipated military assistance from foreign donors--Gurung specifically cited the U.S., U.K., India, and China--will augment RNA capabilities.

2. (U) The press conference follows closely on yet another RNA first--an Army-hosted tour of conflict areas in Rukum and Rolpa for 20 Nepali journalists on July 19. (Note: The RNA took seven members of the foreign press corps and one representative of the national news service on a tour of sites in Rolpa and Western Division Headquarters in Nepalganj May 10-11. End note.) Although the journalists had no opportunity to interview local villagers independently and were accompanied by RNA hosts throughout their visit, many said they found the event useful and informative. Press coverage of the tour was largely favorable.

3. (SBU) Comment: The press conference is remarkable not so much for its content--most of what Gurung briefed had appeared in the press before--but for the fact that it occurred at all. The Embassy and DATT have been encouraging the RNA to be more forthcoming with the press, noting the media's potential as a powerful ally in publicizing Maoist excesses and violence, but encountered considerable institutional resistance from the Army's traditionally close-mouthed hierarchy. Col. Gurung told emboff he had considered holding a press conference much earlier, but had found his plans repeatedly frustrated by bureaucratic inertia. The Colonel credited his July 1-19 visit to the U.S. on an International Visitor Program for government spokesmen with inspiring him to carry through with his original plans. Specifically, he cited visits to the Public Affairs bureaus at the Department of State and Pentagon, including attendance at a press briefing given by A/S Boucher, as events that "gave me the confidence that I could do this." Given the prominent coverage Gurung's briefing garnered in most major newspapers, we hope the RNA will follow up this first effort with similar, regularly scheduled events in the future.

MALINOWSKI